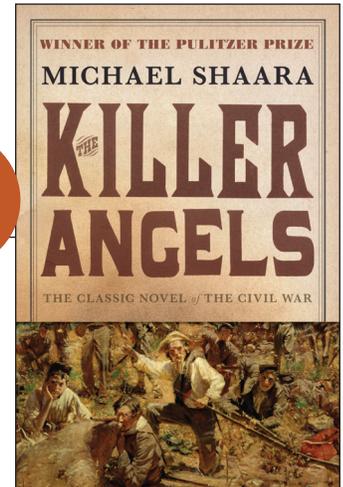




The Killer Angels

The Classic Novel of the Civil War

by Michael Shaara



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Reading Level: 5.5

• about this book •

introduction/plot summary

In *The Killer Angels*, Michael Shaara recapitulates the Battle of Gettysburg. Rather than inventing characters through which to illumine his own perspective of the event, he attempts to recreate events during and leading up to the battle and to reconstruct the actions of several generals who participated.

Acclaim and a Pulitzer Prize followed publication of the book in 1974, yet the book had its critics—some who wished the author had employed more imagination in the plot and characters instead of sticking so religiously to the moment-by-moment occurrences; while others would have preferred not to see the history tainted at all by fiction-writing techniques.

Though the author claims some poetic license in the language the soldiers use, and though he asserts that “the interpretation of character is my own,” no one could refute Shaara’s adherence to the basic facts. Readers who are not Civil War buffs might be amazed that, for example, the colorful last-ditch bayonet charge by the 20th Maine Regiment at Little Round Top—which reads like a scriptwriter’s dream—actually took place. In *The American Iliad*, Confederated Colonel William C. Oates recalled the bravery and skill of the 20th Maine and Colonel Joshua L. Chamberlain. One of Chamberlain’s men, Theodore Gerrish, described the fight: “Our regiment mustered about 350 men....Imagine, if you can, 300 men on the extreme flank of an army, put there to hold the key of the entire position! Stand firm, ye boys of Maine, for not once in a century are men permitted to bear such responsibilities!”

The book is divided into four major sections: Monday, June 29, 1863 (which actually covers events up to dawn of Wednesday, July 1); Wednesday, July 1, 1863: The First Day; Thursday, July 2, 1863: The Second Day; and Friday, July 3, 1863; plus a foreword describing the two armies that will meet at Gettysburg and some of the key individuals who will be dealt with in *The Killer Angels*, and an afterword that summarizes the lives of some of the survivors of Gettysburg. Within the four main sections, the narrative alternates between the vantage points of Union and Rebel soldiers. Maps by Don Pitcher illustrate the strategic positions of the two armies throughout the days of the encounter.

Monday, June 29, 1863

Harrison, a spy for the Army of Northern Virginia, reports to its commander, General Robert E. Lee and his right-hand man, Lt. General James Longstreet, that 80,000 to 100,000 Union soldiers have marched within 200 miles of Lee’s position near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. This information surprises both generals, whose troops had invaded the North, and who would now be outnumbered by these Union forces. They also expected such crucial news to come sooner from J.E.B. Stuart, the cavalry officer assigned to scout and send word to Lee.

Harrison also bears news of a change in Union leadership: Major General George Meade had replaced "Fighting Joe" Hooker as commander of the Union Army. Lee sees this change as an opportunity to strike while the new commander gets his bearings. He decides to concentrate on Gettysburg, the small town where several roads in the area converge, where he intends to cut the Union army off from Washington, D.C.

Buster Kilrain of the 20th Regiment of Infantry, Maine Volunteers, informs Colonel Chamberlain that 120 mutineers are being sent to his command. These men, says Kilrain, have refused to fight for any regiment other than the Second Maine, their original outfit, which has been disbanded. The Union's new commander, General Meade, has authorized Chamberlain to shoot any man who won't fight. Chamberlain, a college professor in his civilian life, uses compassion and persuasion instead of threats to convince all but six of the men to join in the fight: a historic one, he tells them, in which the object is not to protect their land but to preserve freedom.

Spotting Lee's army as it turns toward Gettysburg, Major General John Buford moves his men into the town first, stations them on high ground along Seminary Ridge, and sends word to Major General John Reynolds.

Wednesday, July 1, 1863—The First Day

First shots are fired at dawn as Rebels attack Buford's dismounted cavalry. Reynolds rides in with sorely needed infantry reinforcements and sends messages to other commanders to report to Gettysburg. Moments later, Reynolds is dead.

Lee encounters one weak link after another: First, there is Powell Hill's bout with illness that day, then Harry Heth's confusion about who he was attacking—the "few militia men" turned out to be Buford's and Reynolds' combined troops. But, buoyed by reports that Generals Rodes and Early are attacking the Union army, Lee sends Heth and Pender in to support them.

News of a Union retreat prompts Lee to order General Ewell to take the hill just south of Gettysburg. He and Longstreet disagree on strategy: Longstreet recommends that Rebel forces take a defensive stance on high ground, forcing Union troops out into the open, while Lee wants the Rebels to press forward now that they are already on the attack.

During his postmortem of the day's events, Lee receives disturbing reports from his generals. Ewell did not follow Lee's attack order, and Union men took charge of Cemetery Hill. One of Ewell's aides, Trimble, tells Lee angrily that he had volunteered to lead men up to capture the hill, but Ewell had refused to allow it. Ewell had apparently frozen, and allowed Early to do his decision making.

About two a.m. Thursday, Buford rides to Cemetery Hill to get orders from a commanding officer following the death of Reynolds. General Winfield Hancock, who carried orders from General Meade, tells him to get his men refitted for battle in the morning.

Thursday, July 2, 1863—The Second Day

In the morning, Chamberlain and Kilrain aid a wounded civilian, who is black. This encounter leads Chamberlain to examine his own feelings about people of African descent and about the reasons for this war.

Lee resumes his discussion of tactics with Longstreet. Overruling Longstreet's recommendations, Lee has decided to attack the Union troops who have fortified their positions in the hills. He instructs Longstreet to take Cemetery Hill. Relieved that the decision is finally made, Longstreet prepares for the fight. As they ride toward the enemy Lee and Longstreet ruminate over their internal conflicts—challenging men they had formerly commanded, attacking their own countrymen, and Lee's struggle with a heart condition while Longstreet is tortured by the ghosts of his dead children.

Because of their unfamiliarity with the area, 17,000 Southerners—the two divisions under Longstreet's command—are forced to double back and change directions to avoid marching in plain sight of the enemies in the hills. Ironically, a scout reports that the Union soldiers thought to be lining the ridge are actually on level ground in the peach orchard just ahead. Though Lee's order to attack en echelon seems suicidal at this point and though Longstreet's subordinates advise against it, as Longstreet himself had advised Lee, Longstreet follows orders.

Late in the afternoon, Colonel Chamberlain's 20th Maine regiment is moved into the woods. Colonel Vincent orders Chamberlain not to withdraw from his new position at the left flank of the Union line. "You must defend this place to the last," he is told.

The Rebels engage one regiment after another, and Chamberlain and the 20th Maine anticipate their advance—not only with fear but with joy—for the new opportunity to confront the enemy face to face. As the Rebels rush the low stone wall constructed hastily by Union troops, men fall fast—from wounds that cripple or disfigure and for the dead, no time for goodbyes.

Chamberlain draws quick comfort from seeing his brother Tom alive and well after the first skirmish, but too many others have been hurt, Kilrain among them. Moments later, Chamberlain takes a blast in the side, but collects his thoughts enough to give new orders to the men. As the line of men thins, the remaining soldiers spread out to “plug the holes” in defense of the hill. Ammunition runs low, but Chamberlain understands the necessity of holding the ground—even after hearing that Vincent, the man who gave him the order, is dead.

“Fix bayonets! Charge!” he shouts, and as his regiment rushes downhill the surprised Rebels run down the valley, some stopping to surrender.

With 130 men in the 20th dead or injured, the regiment is at half its strength. Tom Chamberlain boasts that they took 500 prisoners. Having successfully defended Little Round Top, the men are ordered to report to Big Round Top.

Longstreet hears from Goree that Longstreet, not Lee, is being blamed for the defeat at Little Round Top. After a report that some 8,000 men are down, he is heartened by the arrival of General Pickett and his 5,000 troops. Despite Confederate losses, as well as the three Union corps established in the hills, Longstreet sees a weak spot in the Union lines.

Longstreet returns to Lee's headquarters from the battlefield as a culprit to some soldiers and a hero to Fremantle, an observer from England, who congratulates him on his victory. Fremantle marvels at Lee's deviousness and superior strategies; Longstreet rails over the miracles that keep their army alive. Lee thinks of the fight as a close one, even as Longstreet mourns the loss of one-third to one-half of their fighting forces.

The arrival of Jeb Stuart, after his failure to scout the Union position, prompts other generals to demand his court-martial. Early Friday morning, Lee works on a plan for his troops, even as he suffers from chest pain. After reprimanding Stuart for his unfulfilled mission, Lee hears of “confusion” in General Ewell's camp—and attack orders from Lee that were not carried out.

Lee decides to strike the Union forces the next day. Since the Union had been hit on both sides and would be reinforced there, he would send Pickett and his men straight to the center where they would be weakest.

Friday, July 3, 1863

High up on Big Round Top, ensconced behind the stone wall they had built during the night, Chamberlain's regiment forms the end of the Union line. At dawn, a battle had started in the north, and Chamberlain, whose men need food, water, rest, and ammunition, feels relieved that the fighting was somewhere else. Expecting them to have to fight until they fall, he is surprised to hear that replacements are on the way, and that his men have been reassigned to what appears to be the safest spot on the battlefield—the center of the line.

When Lee orders Longstreet to send men up the hill to attack the Union center, Longstreet advises against it: From the hill, Union soldiers could spot the Rebel's every move, and could also be reinforced from behind the hills, without being seen from the low ground. “They will break,” Lee insists. He directed Longstreet to take three divisions—a total of 15,000 fighters—to capture the hill, to march upward to a clump of trees at the center of the ridge. Lee estimates Union strength at the center to be no greater than 5,000 men.

Longstreet passes the order along to his generals—Pickett, Pettigrew, and Trimble.

General Sykes tells Chamberlain that he'll recommend him for a promotion to Brigade commander, as a result of the bayonet charge. Still bleeding from his morning injuries, hungry, and saddened by news of his friend Kilrain's death, Chamberlain finds himself a sudden target of enemy fire, and, amazingly, falls asleep.

On the Confederate side, Brigadier General Lo Armistead agonizes over the actions he's about to take: In attacking the hill, he will break a vow made to his friend Win Hancock, not to lift a hand against him. Hancock is at the top of the hill, commanding Union forces. After reaching the wall and climbing over to the Union side, Armistead is hit, and as he dies, learns that Hancock has been hit as well.

Pickett and other commanders lose most of their men in the battle. As the survivors pull back, Lee finally admits his error to Longstreet, who gives his order to retreat.

A Footnote: Honor Versus Victory

As Fremantle and Longstreet discuss the situation of Richard Garnett, who feels he must die in order to clear his name of Stonewall Jackson's accusation of cowardice, Fremantle brings up "Solferino" and "Charge of the Light Brigade." Though Fremantle considers them examples of bravery in the face of certain death, the references foreshadow events at Gettysburg. In a war for Italian independence, the 1859 Battle of Solferino was unexpected: Neither side knew the exact position of the other troops. Such heavy losses resulted (29,000 killed or wounded, 4,000 missing or captured) that the battle led to the establishment of the International Red Cross.

"Charge of the Light Brigade," the poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, immortalizes the British cavalry attack on the Russian position at Balaklava during the Crimean War. Confused orders led to the British cavalry's sweep into a valley—right into the midst of Russian artillery and cavalry. Forty percent of the Light Brigade dies in that attack.

At Gettysburg—where Lee's orders were not always followed; where the Confederacy did not know the exact position of Union forces; where Maine men on a hillside fire upon company after company of "Gray-green-yellow uniforms rolling up in a mass. . . , dissolving in smoke and thunder,"—the casualties for the three-day conflict escalated to 23,000 for the Union, 28,000 for the Confederacy.

→ discussion and writing

for discussion/comprehension

1. Why does General Longstreet doubt his own spy's report of the Union Army's advance toward Confederate troops in Pennsylvania?
2. As John Buford tracks the Confederate Army, he stops to wave at a Rebel officer. Why would he greet an enemy in this way?
3. How could Armistead and Hancock, on opposite sides of the fight, become close friends?
4. What was Fremantle's purpose in traveling with Longstreet and the Confederate army?
5. Why did officers under Lee want J.E.B. Stuart courtmartialled?
6. Why does Trimble thank Longstreet for an assignment that could very likely hasten Trimble's own death?

activity/composition

1. Throughout *The Killer Angels*, Arthur Fremantle expresses admiration for the Confederacy and its similarities to England: its officers, the style of fighting, Southern cuisine and culture. The one point he takes exception to is the Southerners' support of slavery. Had Fremantle traveled with Meade and Chamberlain instead of Lee and Longstreet, how might he have written about the Union Army? Step into Fremantle's shoes, as a writer from another country, choose a side (North or South) to attach yourself to, and set forth your own perspective of the events. Points to deal with might include battle tactics, causes of the war, contrasts or compatibilities between your nation's culture and that of the army you are traveling with, and the outcome of the war you predict based on your observations and interviews.
2. Two philosophies on leadership emerge from the following quotes in *The Killer Angels*:
 Chamberlain (remember the teachings of "old Ames"): "Two things an officer must do, to lead men. . . . You must care for your men's welfare. You must show physical courage."
 Lee: "To be a good soldier, you must love the army. But to be a good officer you must be willing to order the death of the thing you love." How do the actions of officers in this novel reflect one or both of these ingredients of leadership? What strengths emerged when either of these philosophies were employed? What weaknesses were revealed?

→ vocabulary

The plethora of terms associated with warfare may seem overwhelming to some members of a general reading audience. These descriptions and distinctions could help:

Cavalry—troops trained to fight on horseback

Artillery—troops armed with large-caliber firing weapons

Infantry—units of army trained to fight on foot

Battalion—a headquarters company with four infantry companies

Regiment—a unit of ground troops containing two or more battalions

Brigade—two or more regiments led by a brigadier general and auxiliary service troops led by a lieutenant general

Volley—a discharge of several missiles all at once

Flank—the left or right side of a military formation

Echelon—troops formed in parallel units arranged to the left or right of the rear unit like stairsteps

Bayonet—knife fitted into the muzzle end of the rifle

Caisson—a large box or horse-drawn vehicle used for holding ammunition

Napoleon—a type of cannon named for the French emperor

Taps—bugle call to signal “lights out” or played at military funerals

→ beyond the book

missing in action

While *The Killer Angels* discusses slavery and its causal role in the war, the one African in the saga makes a cameo appearance—though wounded, he is not a soldier, and his history and future are obscure. Female characters stay clear of the battle sites; they are objects of the fighting men’s admiration, gratitude, or dreams. The single reference to Native Americans has to do with a joke about cigar smoke and fat men. The focus here is on male citizens of European descent.

Readers might be encouraged to flesh out this skeletal picture of Civil War participation. The following sources point to the cultural diversity of fighters, nurses, spies, and spouses: *The Negro’s Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (James M. McPherson, New York: Ballantine Books, 1991); *Afro-Americans in the Civil War: From Slavery to Citizenship* (Charles Harris Wesley and Patricia W. Romera, Publisher’s Agency, 1976); *Marching Toward Freedom: Blacks in the Civil War, 1861-1865* (James M. McPherson, New York: Facts on File, 1991); *Undying Glory, the Story of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1991); *Patriots in Disguise: Women Warriors of the Civil War*, First Edition (Richard Hall, New York: Paragon House, 1993); *A Separate Battle: Women and the Civil War* (Ina Chang, New York: Lodestar Books, 1991); *The American Indian as Participant in the Civil War* (Annie Heloise Abel, St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1972).

additional resources

For photos of Longstreet, Ewell, Lee, Stuart, Meade, artists’ renderings of Gettysburg battle scenes, plus more maps of principal military campaigns and positions, see *A Battlefield Atlas of the Civil War* (Annapolis, MD: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1983).

The Civil War Library and Museum in Philadelphia, PA (1805 Pine Street, 215-735-8196) has 15,000 volumes, manuscripts, and exhibits on the Civil War.

for further reading:

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— about this guide's writer

ALICE JONES-MILLER is an editor, writer and publisher in Westchester County, New York.